

## Prelude to Korea

### Puerto Rico's 65th Infantry Regiment and the Puerto Rican Exercises

Colonel Gilberto Villahermosa



Taking place on the island of Vieques, only four miles from Puerto Rico, the Puerto Rican Exercises (PORTREX) of 1950 pitted Colonel William Harris and his Puerto Rican 65th Infantry Regiment, against elements of the 3rd Infantry and 82nd Airborne Divisions. The mission of the 65th Infantry, the "Aggressor" force, was to defend Vieques against a "Liberating" force. PORTREX thus pitted two of the U.S. Army's most famous divisions

against relatively unknown Puerto Rican troops. The men of the 65th Infantry, however, were determined to "fight like Hell" rather than be driven off the island.

In December 1949, the men of the 65th moved to Vieques to prepare their defenses. Harris and his commanders conducted a reconnaissance of the island and then planned the placement of heavy weapons and command posts. In the meantime, the men of the regiment trained attacking and defending. In all, the Puerto Rican soldiers spent 70,000 man-days digging defensive positions, constructing underground command posts, and emplacing obstacles. "Their camouflage was excellent," observed one reporter, and "their fields of fire were well arranged."

Early on the morning of 8 March, D-Day, the first of over 20,000 Navy shells began impacting on Vieques. The Air Force then unleashed a continuous string of bombs that shook the regimental command post, and almost 5,000 combat troops of the 3rd Infantry Division began their assault on the



beaches. The Puerto Ricans responded with heavy mortar and artillery barrages, which, in conjunction with the beach obstacles, stopped the landing force, inflicting 40 percent casualties on the attackers. "The umpires told me...our beach defenses are the best that they have ever seen – even better than what the Japanese threw at them in the Pacific," reported one battalion commander to Harris. The umpires called a halt and directed men of the 65th to clear lanes through the beach obstacles so that the attacking troops could come ashore. The landing forces then continued their landings.



The 3rd Infantry Division spent the first night reorganizing and building up its forces for a morning assault. The attack came at dawn and within hours Lieutenant Colonel Dammer called to inform Harris that his 2nd Battalion was under heavy pressure. At about the same time, the sound of low-flying C-119 Flying Boxcars alerted the Puerto Ricans that elements of the 82nd Airborne Division were headed their way. Harris responded by putting the regiment's counterattack plan into motion. Anti-aircraft fire inflicted heavy losses on the paratroopers even before

they hit the ground. When they landed, they were met with withering mortar and artillery fire, which decimated their ranks. The 65th Infantry's reserve battalion then entered the battle, inflicting heavy losses on the men of the 82nd Airborne. The remaining paratroopers, however, penetrated the regiment's position, driving it from the high ground controlling the beaches.

By the morning of D+2, the 3rd Infantry Division attack had ground to a halt with the 65th Infantry holding its ground against tremendous pressure. Later that day, the senior commanders of the Liberating forces were "killed" when they accepted a booby-trapped "gift" from a Puerto Rican soldier disguised as a grateful *hibaro*. Harris took advantage of the confusion that followed by launching a skillful infantry and armor counterattack preceded by smoke and an intense artillery barrage. The Puerto Ricans quickly fought their way to the beachhead. The Liberating Forces responded with forty-two on-call aircraft, inflicting heavy losses on the men of the 65th. Further assaults by the 3rd Infantry Division now forced the Puerto Ricans back, and by the morning of D+5 the Liberating Forces had driven the regiment to its last positions on the far side of the island. There were still two days to go and the men of the 65th were determined to hold out.

The morning of D+6 opened with a roar as the Navy and Air Force began their pre-attack bombardment. The 3rd Infantry Division's final drive against Harris and his men was only beginning when the 65th responded with another counterattack by a force of truck drivers, cooks, and support personnel supported by tanks and artillery. Before the attack could gain momentum, however, the umpires declared the exercise over. The Puerto Ricans had held their ground!

PORTREX ended on the morning of March 12, 1950, the largest amphibious and airborne maneuvers in United States peacetime history. The Puerto Rican soldiers received numerous accolades for their tenacity and the 65th Infantry was complimented on its defensive positions, which one Army general called "the most extensive and most realistic...ever undertaken by American troops in a training exercise." Another senior observer called the regiment's counterattacks "brilliantly executed." As a result, the regiment and its Puerto Rican troops received a great deal of positive exposure, impressing senior U.S. civilian and military leaders. More importantly, the 65th Infantry would go to war in less than six months as one of the United States Army's largest and best-trained infantry formations. Ironically, the regiment's Puerto Rican soldiers would fight in Korea, for four long years, as part of the 3rd Infantry Division, the unit they had bested in PORTREX.

